Case Study - Suicide Indicators: A First Responder’s Experience

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Disclaimer: This case study is based on true events. Names have been changed to protect those involved.

It was the spring of 1991 when Airman James had just completed basic training and reported to his next command to start the next phase of his training. Several sailors from his boot camp company had reported to the same training command to continue their training. For most, this was their first time away from home. Only a few of them had been assigned to the barracks as James, but none had been assigned to the same class. Airman James had been assigned to a night school class that was all male ranging in age from 18 to 25 years.

Keeping with tradition, the instructors started the first day by choosing class leaders to serve as the primary point of contact for various class responsibilities. When the class was asked who was most senior, one student, Airman Timmy, raised his hand and blurted out, “I’m going to OCS (Officer Candidate School)!” His declaration invoked a barrage of disparaging and insulting responses from many of the other students in the class and earned Airman Timmy instant status as the least popular member of the class. Rarely did a day pass without Timmy becoming the target of an insult or ridicule. Airman Timmy soon began to try and impress some of his classmates by showing off expensive technology he had purchased or boasting about all he was going to do after he completed training and transferred to the fleet.

Airman James did not get selected as class leader but, instead, was selected to be a duty section leader. This responsibility resulted in his reassignment to a new room with other duty section leaders who worked together to maintain security watches and organize barracks cleaning details. One day, Airman James and his roommate Airman Mark were sitting in their room polishing their boots. Airman Timmy walked in, as he often did on duty days, and began talking about school and how hard thing had been getting. James and Mark continued to polish their boots as they listened to what they thought was Timmy blowing off some steam. Timmy finished his conversation with, “I just don’t know how I can go on…” before turning and leaving the room. James and Mark sat there, mouths open and stunned at what they just heard. James looked at Mark and asked, “Did he just say what I think he said?” Mark replied, “I think he did.” They decided to get up immediately and report what just happened to the instructor standing barracks watch. The instructor told them he would take care of it and sent them on their way.

That evening Airman Timmy was called out of class and taken to the schoolhouse office where he was confronted about the comments he had made to James and Mark. After about an hour passed, Timmy returned to the class and immediately began yelling at Airman James about what he reported. James tried to reason with Timmy for a minute before telling him that this was not the place and time for this conversation and that they could discuss it during their lunch break. When the lunch break time arrived, James tried to talk to Timmy about the events that had transpired. Timmy’s responded by cursing him and telling James to leave him alone. James was a little disturbed by Timmy’s response and a little irritated from being lashed out at by him in the class. But, James also felt that it was good that Timmy was alive and mad at him instead of dead by his own hand.

Airman Timmy never really made friends with any of the other students in the class. His behavior became more negative as the class progressed. He would often submit scathingly negative comments about instructors at the close of instructional blocks and sometimes expressed them verbally. This caused a spiral effect which resulted in disciplinary counseling and the loss of an advanced phase of training. Airman Timmy completed his training and transferred to the fleet. It is not known if he attended OCS or presented any other suicide indicators or gestures again.

Discussion questions:

1. What risk factors for suicide were present in this case study?
2. What suicide warning signs are presented in this case study?
3. Identify the first responders?
4. Identify when first responders intervene, or should have, and how?
5. What did the first responders do right? What did they do wrong?